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Portfolios and Learning Styles as Alternative Tools for Self-Directed Language Learning

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Introduction

The rapidly growing demands of globalization make it imperative that all are English-literate, irrespective of their professional placements. In such a condition, it has become even more crucial for the teachers of English to impart the language education from a 'practically' communicative point of view. Plenty of teaching methodologies have been tried and testified. But it is still an intriguing matter of fact that one particular methodology that has been proven successful on one specific condition proves to be 'unworkable' elsewhere.

This is the point of departure for the current paper, which tries to pronounce the hitherto least considered fact that the more autonomous the students are the better the language learning will be. Normally, in most of the Indian ESL classrooms, students are not autonomous in terms of their awareness of what and how they learn. It is relatively important for the students to be aware of their learning and be self-regulated in deciding the way that they find more conducive and comfortable with.

Why should Learners be taught Learning Strategies?

Learning strategies are the thoughts and actions we engage in, consciously or not, to learn new information. The goal of teaching learning strategies is to help students to consciously control how they learn so that they can be efficient, motivated, and independent language learners (Chamot, Barnhardt, El-Dinary, & Robbins, 1999). Teaching the

students these learning strategies will help the teachers in the long run in that it helps the language learners to realize their actual goals of improving their knowledge and proficiency of the second language, in our case, English. An awareness of their own selves, how, what and why they learn will help the learners become conscious of their goals, so to say, self-directed goals. This awareness of their goals will enable them to devise and determine the means to achieve these goals. According to Zimmerman (1990), in their metacognitive processes, "self-regulated learners set goals, self-monitor, and self-evaluate their learning processes which enable them to be self-aware and decisive in their learning approach".

As such, the earnest intention of teaching the learning strategies to the students is to help all of them become better language learners. When students begin to understand their own learning processes and can exert some control over these processes, they tend to take more responsibility for their own learning. This self-knowledge and skill in regulating one's own learning is a characteristic of successful learners, including successful language learners. Research with both first and second language learners is revealing some of the ways of thinking that guide and assist an individual's attempts to learn more effectively (Paris & Winograd, 1990).

Interactive Strategies to Enhance Self-directed Learning

In the current globalized scenario, as days go by, it is becoming more pronounced that the language teachers expect students to work independently and be responsible for their own learning. Therefore, the learners are compelled to find out what and how they are learning and how comfortable they are in learning the language. This is where it becomes essential that the teachers should make them take that

responsibility and reflect on their own thinking process as well. In other words, if the learners are aware of their learning practices they can monitor their own progress and evaluate their performance and achievement.

In the process of the learners' becoming aware of their learning, interactive techniques allow students the opportunity to engage with new material as they learn, allowing them to process the information and cement it into their knowledge banks. Teachers can use one or multiple interactive strategies to benefit students and create more engaging lessons. As a matter of fact, there are quite a lot of language learning resources that have been made available to both the language teachers and learners. These resources range from language labs to multi-media enabled classrooms. Nevertheless, as far as the English teaching scenario in India is concerned, the language classrooms are dominated by a teacher-centered, text-book oriented, exam-driven climate that lead to nothing constructive or productive but mere rote-learning. In such a condition, creating self-awareness among the language learners can be best done through Learning Styles and Portfolios.

Self-Awareness through Learning Styles

Learning styles can be explained in different ways, depending upon one's understanding. According to Brown, it is "the manner in which individuals perceive and process information in learning situations", and he argues that learning style preference is one main aspect of learning style, referring to the choice of one learning situation over another. Kneefe (1979) defined a learning style as "Cognitive, affective, and physiological traits that are relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment".

One of the universally accepted ways of looking at learning styles is the four modalities of learning, as proposed by Bandler, R. and Grinder, J., in the field of Neuro-Linguistic Programming, students may prefer a Visual (seeing), Auditory (hearing), Kinesthetic (moving) or Tactile (touching) way of learning.

According to their theory, those who prefer a visual learning style,

- ☞ look at the teacher's face intently
- ☞ like looking at wall displays, books etc.
- ☞ often recognize words by sight
- ☞ use lists to organize their thoughts and
- ☞ recall information by remembering how it was set out on a page

By the same token, those who prefer an auditory learning style,

- ☞ like the teacher to provide verbal instructions
- ☞ like dialogues, discussions and plays
- ☞ solve problems by talking about them
- ☞ use rhythm and sound as memory aids.

People who prefer a kinesthetic learning style,

- ☞ learn best when they are involved or active
- ☞ find it difficult to sit still for long periods
- ☞ use movement as a memory aid

Those who prefer a tactile way of learning...

- ☞ use writing and drawing as memory aids
- ☞ learn well in hands-on activities like projects and demonstrations

The teachers should also realize that the students learn better and more quickly if the teaching methods used match their preferred learning-styles.

Once the learners are made aware of

their type of learning, they become confident and responsible for their learning. As learning improves, their self esteem also improves. This has a further positive effect on learning. Students who have become bored with learning may become interested once again. An added advantage of this realization is the obvious improvement in the student-teacher relationship since the student is more successful and is more interested in learning.

Self-Awareness through Portfolios

When there is an awareness of the learning styles, there should also be an awareness of the assessment modes. As far as education is concerned, a portfolio refers to a kind of student-oriented, student-centered assessment. For some teachers, portfolio is part of an alternative assessment can either include students' achievements or simply document their best work. For other teachers, the portfolio documents the students' learning process, and still others use it as a means of promoting learner reflection (Nunes, 2004). Hamp-Lyons (1994) labels portfolio an excellent pedagogical tool interweaving assessment with instruction: it provides chances to integrate more forms of evaluation into teaching, such that evaluation will become "a less threatening and more supportive activity" to learners.

According to Kaptan and Korkmaz (2000), portfolio is the operation of recording the success and performance of the student during the learning process. Thus, with the portfolio, answers can be received to the questions such as

- how did the student think?,
- what did he learn?,
- what way did he follow while learning?,
- which difficulties did he face while learning?,

- how did he ask questions?,
- how did he analyze?,
- how did he configure the knowledge?,
- how did he communicate with the other people?

So, to use portfolio which is based on cognitive and constructivist learning theory can be effective as a teaching method in a language classroom.

Types of Portfolios

According to Columba & Dolgos (1995, p. 174-175), there are basically three types of portfolios to consider for classroom use.

Showcase: This type of portfolio focuses on the student's best and most representative work. This type of portfolio is similar to an artist's portfolio where a variety of work is selected to reflect breadth of talent. Therefore, in this portfolio the student selects what he or she thinks is representative work. This folder is most often seen at open houses and parent visitations

Teacher-Student Portfolio: This type of portfolio is often called the "working portfolio" or a "working folder". This is an interactive teacher-student portfolio that aids in communication between teacher and student. The teacher and student conference to add or delete within the content of the show-case portfolio

Teacher Alternative Assessment Portfolio: All the items in this type of portfolio are scored, rated, ranked, or evaluated. Teachers can keep individual student portfolios that are solely for the teacher's use as an assessment tool. This is a focused type of portfolio and is a model of the holistic approach to assessment (p. 175).

Portfolio assessment provides a more authentic assessment of students' achievement and comprehensive views of students'

performances in contexts, it encourages students to develop into independent and self-directed learners, and enhances communication among teacher and students. It can provide opportunities for learners to demonstrate his/ her weaknesses and strengths and for teachers to direct their teaching. It also can encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning, and enhance student-teacher communication. In addition, portfolio assessment has a potential to demonstrate students' learning process and learning product over time.

Suggestions

Teachers should be stimulated to use new teaching and assessment methods, including learning style awareness and portfolio management, taking into consideration especially the positive attitude of the students' towards these methods. These can be tried in addition to the existing assessment methods, may be not as a mainstream assessment. In addition to trying style-alike groups for greatest efficiency, the teacher can also use style-varied groups for generating greatest flexibility of styles and behaviors.

Students who think and work strategically are more motivated to learn and have a higher sense of self-efficacy or confidence in their own learning ability. That is, strategic students possess a great self-esteem and they strongly believe that they are more able to succeed academically than those students who do not know how to use strategies effectively. It is this motivation of the students, to partake and become successful at all the learning tasks, which keeps them more alert and receptive in language classrooms. The value of this type of self-knowledge is that it leads to reflection, to planning how to proceed with a learning task, to monitoring one's own performance on an ongoing basis, and to self-

evaluation upon task completion. In other words, it leads to self-regulation of one's learning. Students with greater metacognitive awareness understand the similarity between the current learning task and previous ones, know the strategies required for successful learning, and anticipate success as a result of knowing "how to learn." Therefore it becomes imperative on the part of the teachers to introduce the practice of making the language learners gain self-awareness through more feasible modes like Learning Styles and Portfolios and thereby apply the same in self-directed learning.

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Reading Tasks for Critical Thinking

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Introduction

The globalization of education, migration of students from one community to the other, or one country to another, results in a lot of competition among seekers of employment. In order to obtain employment English language is essential and not only the knowledge of English language but critical thinking is also necessary. When an individual need to enter, stays in, and progress in the world of work whether individual work on their own or as part of a team, critical thinking skill is essential. Critical thinking helps an individual to get into the employment and succeed in that. Critical thinking is not an easy concept to define as it can mean quite different things to different people in different contexts and cultures. Generally speaking to think critically about an issue is to consider that issue from various perspectives, to look at and challenge any possible assumptions that may underlie the issue and to explore its possible alternatives. English language teacher can develop critical thinking skill among the learners through a variety of reading tasks.

Meaning of Critical Thinking

Critical Thinking is the ability and tendency to gather evaluate and use information effectively (Beyer, 1985). Chance (1986) defines Critical thinking as the ability to analyze facts generate and organize ideas, defend opinions, make comparisons, draw inference, evaluate arguments and solve problems.

Critical thinking aims at teaching

learner how to think rather than what to think (Taylor, 2001). The components of critical thinking which are reasoning, problem solving, decision making along with creative thinking are thought to be the skills of vital importance for success at school and in life (Collier et al., 2002). Beyer (1995) says that critical thinking is a disciplined manner of thought that a person uses to assess the validity of something (statements, news, stories, arguments, research etc).

Need and Importance

The critical thinking is needed to work on developing and honing the rest of the skills such as having a personal value system, perspective, have an open mind, sense of humor, resilience, acceptance, get into employment and succeed in it. It develops the attitude that one don't accept everything as at face value. It enables them to use their own judgment and common sense to answer questions. It is necessary to help the learners to change a culture's way of thinking. It is important for bringing about change. It helps develop better understanding of English language and culture and hence better overall English communication. Critical thinking helps to recognize the human, interpersonal, technical, scientific, and mathematical dimensions of a problem identify the root cause of a problem. Critical thinking evaluates solutions to make recommendations or decisions. It also helps to check to see if a solution works and act on opportunities for improvement.

Review of related literature

Most of the researchers agree that an important aspect of critical thinking is the ability to collect, evaluate and make use of information effectively and appropriately (Beyer, 1985). Definitions for critical thinking are concerned

and often stress the meta-cognitive elements of critical thinking, arguing that it can be defined as "thinking about your thinking while you're thinking to make your thinking better" (Paul, 1993, p. 91). Similarly Elder and Paul (1994) argue that critical thinking means that thinkers take charge of their own thinking. Uden and Beaumont (2006) tell that people develop sound criteria and standards for analyzing and evaluating their own thinking processes and use of these criteria to improve the quality of their thinking.

Most theorists who base their theories, research and definitions of critical thinking on cognitive and developmental psychology often define critical thinking as "thinking that is purposeful, reasoned, and goal directed" (Halpern, 1996, p. 5). It has been argued that "Critical thinking skills" are not likely to develop spontaneously. Teachers must take a directive role in initiating and guiding critical thinking since it is considered a "Learnable skill" (Bean, 1996, p. 4). In this context, language classes are particularly appropriate for teaching critical thinking.

Lipman (1984, 1988) says that teachers should help students shift: a) from guessing to estimating b) from preferring to assessing c) from grouping to classifying d) from believing to assuming e) from inferring to inferring logically f) from associating concepts to grasping principles g) from noting relationship to noting relationships among relationship h) from supposing to hypothesizing i) from offering opinions without reasons to offering opinions with reasons and j) from making judgments without criteria to making judgment with criteria.

Objectives of the study

The main objectives of this study is to know the need and importance of critical

thinking in employability, to know those elements of critical thinking which may be developed through reading tasks and to list out some of the reading tasks for critical thinking in ELT.

Teaching Reading and Critical Thinking

In order to develop critical thinking through reading tasks teacher has to create friendly, supportive and non-threatening atmosphere in the classroom. It can have a positive impact on students motivation and language performance and that a "positive climate for learning has been identified by many educationists as a critical factor in effective learning" (Little, 1997, p. 119).

It is a duty of English teacher that before assigning reading tasks to their students they have accounted for their need, language proficiency, objectives of teaching and curriculum etc. Teacher should also be aware of the cognitive and mental processes that constitute critical thinking. They should also be familiar with the tasks, skills and situations, to which these processes are applied and use a range classroom tasks to promote these processes and also provide framework for such instructions. Teacher divides critical thinking into four components, each consisting of several specific skills, which can be taught to students (Ennis, 1985, p. 44-48). These are a) defining and clarifying b) asking appropriate questions to clarify or challenge c) judging the credibility of a source and d) solving problems and drawing conclusions.

Teachers need to implement reading tasks for developing basic elements of critical thinking. In relation to writing skill Correia (2006) suggests that language teacher should incorporate active reading tasks like paraphrasing, note taking, inferring, predicting, anticipating which require students to go

beyond a superficial reading of the text to read between the lines, rather than engaging in tasks.

Teaching critical thinking skills means guiding the students through judging and questioning an idea or thought based on reliable evidence by establishing logical relationships among the statements or data. Therefore in reading, we, teachers, should expect the learners to perceive and recognize a) claims b) the claims with reasons (arguments) c) evidence d) opposing arguments e) refutations (to correspond the) f) fallacies (flawed reasoning) (Stapleton, 2001).

Although critical thinking appears to be quite philosophical and sophisticated, in its centre lies the question "why" (Taylor, 2001). Though the central question seems to be "why", all sorts of questioning are needed. Learners should learn to explore the phenomena behind what is apparent by questioning.

Reading Tasks for Critical Thinking

English teacher should design tasks in such a way that tasks should provide scope to assess all the areas of learning like knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Some tasks/activities are listed below.

- ❖ **Eliciting ideas:** English teacher has introduced a topic and ask the students to read and interpret the topic given to them in different ways.
- ❖ **Present picture related to topic:** Teacher has to present different pictures in the form of paper clippings, diagrams, caricature, matchstick diagrams. Give a few minutes time to observe those and ask them what the pictures are about? Encourage to exchange their ideas critically.
- ❖ **Highlighting keywords and their**

meanings: Teacher has to highlight the meaning of keywords through illustrations and focus the attention on the key words.

- ❖ Teacher has given the passage to their students and asks them to read and eliminate which is not relevant to the passage.
- ❖ Teacher has to give jumbled sentences, flash cards, and pictures ask their students to read and rearrange them.
- ❖ **Scenarios:** Scenarios can be used to trigger and enhance critical thinking. They can be constructed by the teacher. Real life situation can be used as well. In handling with scenarios, each student might come up with different ideas. They might reach a decision or find solutions to the problem scenario which help the students to develop problem solving abilities. The aim is to direct the students to produce ideas as many as possible and to have them make judgments and reach a conclusion from multiple premises based on evidence in the scenarios and establishing logical relationships among the statements or data. Scenarios may be taken from media such as newspapers, television etc. Differing accounts and editorials can be compared as a way of helping students read with a questioning attitude. Students can construct their own arguments for discussion or publication in student newspapers. In the process they become more discriminating consumer of news media advertising and entertainment (Carr, 1990).
- ❖ Literary texts like short stories, novels dramas, poetry etc., may be given to students to read that add value to immerse students into thinking as literary texts are argumentative in nature. Literature offers students more opportunities than any other area of the curriculum to consider ideas,

values, and ethical questions (Carr, 1990).

- ❖ Graphic organizers are effective visual aids which show information structure of the texts and arrange essential aspects of an idea or topic into a pattern using labels. Graphic organizers are excellent tools for learning the structure of thinking skills. A graphic organizer provides a powerful visual picture of information and allows the mind "to see" patterns and relationships (Gilligan, 2004).

They can be used to enhance learning and create a foundation for learning. As each details (facts, relationships, properties conflict, storyline, characters as in the case of stories) can be easily visualized through the use of graphic organizers they are worthy to promote thinking skills to a great extent (Grabe, 1997, p.2-15). Graphic organizers help the student recall the information in the text to be used and assumptions on which they will probably construct their reasoning and which give way to healthy reasoning, evaluations, and decisions.

Conclusion

English language teacher has to develop the critical thinking skill in their ELT class because, it enables the learners to determine their own criteria and to judge and question an idea or thought based on a reliable evidence and produce assertions. Teacher has to develop critical thinking skill which is essential for employability and succeed in it through reading tasks by using variety of materials.

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